

G 284.6
044m
c.2

Am. May.

Apr. 88

THE MORAVIAN EASTER.

NOWHERE is the sacred festival of Easter preceded by such extensive preparations and celebrated so elaborately as among the Moravians of Salem, North Carolina. Even the observance of Christmas pales by comparison: a fact which may in part be attributed to the balmy Southern weather which usually favors the Easter period, and helps the flaxen-haired Moravian maidens to ornament their house of God with the fresh, sweet flowers and foliage of the early spring.

These floral decorations are artistic in conception and arrangement, and so profuse that the church interior becomes a firmament of evergreens and flowers. In addition to the products of forest and garden, many rare exotics are imported for the occasion or grown within the greenhouses of the town. Cedar, ivy and holly hang in festoons; the galleries are embowered; the great organ, the pulpit and the rostrum are lavishly decorated, and behind the pulpit shine forth, in large letters, deftly fashioned with white hyacinths and roses, the words, "Christ is Risen." The decorations, of course, appear to greatest advantage at evening service, when the church is brilliantly illuminated.

For weeks before the first observances of the festival take place, an immense choir is drawn together for practice, and voices are attuned to sing the soulful anthems of the church that are appropriate to the occasion. The Moravians are distinguished for good church music, and every boy and girl in Salem is early

taught the rudiments, both vocal and instrumental; so that for the Easter choral service, there is a splendid store of talent from which to draw.

The celebration begins on Palm Sunday, when liturgical services are held, accompanied by a sermon appropriate to the commemoration of Christ's entry into Jerusalem. The exercises present a foretaste of the musical feast yet to come. During Passion Week (between Palm Sunday and Easter), a number of interesting services are held, both morning and evening, and attract a very general attendance; of these the most solemn and impressive take place on Good Friday.

The following day (Saturday) is called "Great Sabbath," on which the Love Feast, in imitation of the apostolical *agapæ*, is celebrated. This observance is one of the most original and distinctive features of the Moravian Church, and every member of the congregation is present, save the very sick and infirm—even the mothers carrying babes being assigned to seats in the lecture-room adjoining the main auditorium, where prattle and cries may not disturb the services.

The contrast between the intense solemnity of the previous day and the light-heartedness of this one, is plainly portrayed upon the faces of the congregation; a joyous smile illuminates every countenance, even that of the man of God, who, with a beaming light playing on him, warns his hearers not to make it a season of levity. A neatly printed

155
P/155

NGO



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2014

<https://archive.org/details/moravianeaster00oldh>

programme is adhered to, and provides largely for congregational singing, or the half-chant, half-anthem, which is peculiar to the Moravians; many beautiful solos and choruses are given by the choir with organ accompaniment.

The specially distinctive feature of this day's worship is the novel service of coffee and sweetened bread. To the air already laden with the scent of flowers is added the delightful aroma of the best Java, distilled in huge urns in the basement below.

At the proper moment, as fixed by the programme, the doors of each aisle are thrown open, and through them file two processions, one of men and one of women, all bearing huge wooden trays containing cakes of sweetened bread. The women, who wear dainty white aprons and snowy mull caps, pass down the right aisle, and serve each female member of the congregation with cake; while the men, dressed in conventional black, wait similarly upon their own sex, seated on the opposite side of the church. When all are served with sweetened bread the waiters pass out and return with their trays full of huge porcelain mugs of hot steaming coffee; these are likewise served to the congregation, who, led by the choir, sing throughout the whole distribution.

The choir pauses when the bread and coffee have been given out; and the minister arises, makes a few remarks, and finally, after asking the blessing of God upon the service, breaks the bread and begins to eat. This is a signal to the congregation to do likewise, after which the choir begins its anthem, which the minister reads out, stanza by stanza.

The cups and remnants of bread, later on, are borne out by the same waiters, and after more singing, interspersed by words from the preacher, the congregation rises to receive the benediction, and departs amid sonorous peals of the great organ.

During the afternoon the graves in the cemetery are decorated with flowers, and a little later the nests for the "Good Rabbit" to lay in are secreted within the flower yards of each household. It is an old tradition—as dear to the younger population of Salem as that of Kris Kringle in Christmas-time—that the rabbits lay beautifully colored eggs at Easter.

The nests are sometimes made of candy

and the eggs likewise, but the usual custom is to improvise a nest of grass or straw, and place within it real eggs stained of every conceivable hue. These are discovered by the little folks early Sunday morning, and a pretty sight it is to see the childish faces aglow with great delight and anticipation as they scamper from hedge to bush in quest of the Good Rabbit's freshly-laid eggs.

The children use the eggs in the well-known game which consists in testing the strength of their shells. There are numerous other popular sports and observances and many traditions, one of which is that the sun dances in the sky on Easter Sunday morning.

To the visitor at Salem during these observances the early morning services on Easter Sunday in the graveyard are the most imposing and weird in character. Long before the first faint streaks of dawn are seen in the eastern horizon, the church band ascends to the belfry in the lofty steeple, high above the roofs of the tallest houses, and thence, in the deepest darkness that precedes the dawn, the sweet, solemn music of a Moravian hymn floats out from the brazen throats of the cornets upon the cool, quiet air of early morning—soft and low at first, each succeeding note swelling in volume, evoking countless echoes that are wafted back from distant vale and hill-side, until all the air seems filled with the sweet, joyous strains, announcing "Christ is Risen."

Soon a light here and there, shining through old-fashioned dimity curtains in quaint dormer windows, indicates the awaking of households; these lights increase in number until no dwelling can be seen without a gleaming casement. All is activity within each home, and sounds of merry voices and ripples of youthful laughter are heard on every side. Already people are on the streets, wending their way to the church to assemble before its massive doors.

The old clock in the steeple peals forth the hour of five; the pastor comes out from the church and pauses upon the broad stone steps, beneath the light of a gas jet. He reads a litany, and a hymn—which is sung by the multitude, with whose voices sound the clear mellow notes of the cornets. A procession is formed

in twos, and, with the band at its head playing a sacred hymn, marches slowly past the church into an avenue lined on either side with majestic cedars a century old, and then proceeds to the Moravian God's Acre, the graveyard.

Few more strangely impressive sights can be imagined, than this early morning pilgrimage to the city of the dead. The sombre shadows of the night are beginning to disappear, as in long line delicately-defined silhouettes wend their way. At regular intervals on either side of the white graveled walk, sentinel-like, stand venerable mossy cedars. The bracing air is sweet with the perfume of the first flowers of spring. Clearly and slowly the band plays its measured march, while echoing foot-falls keep perfect time to the cadence of the quaint Moravian melody.

Arriving at the cemetery, the band ceases its weird strains, and with head bared, the man of God reads in slow and solemn tones the Easter morning litany; hymns are sung by the congregation, and the services—commemorative of the appearance of the two holy women at the tomb of Jesus at an early hour on “the first day of the week”—are prolonged until the bright beams of the sun peep over the neighboring hill-tops, when the band bursts forth in a joyous strain, aided by the voices of the whole congregation. After this, the vast throng of participants and spectators disperse. Thousands of people witness these early morning ceremonies, every year.

Appropriate sermons are preached, both in the morning and in the evening

of Easter Sunday, attracting large audiences. The music, during these services is grander, if possible, than that which accompanies any of the exercises of Passion Week, and is of a more joyous nature.

Confirmation was usually administered during this day, to candidates for membership, but the ceremony has recently been observed on Palm Sunday, instead.

During the afternoon of Easter Sunday, the cemetery is thronged with visitors, viewing the exquisite floral tributes on the graves of departed loved ones. Services held in the church during the evening conclude the formal ceremonies of a Moravian Easter.

The next day, known as Easter Monday, is a great holiday, and is celebrated chiefly by the young people, who organize fishing and picnicking parties, and spend the day in some neighboring wood, or upon the banks of a rippling mountain-stream. This observance of Easter Monday is general among the surrounding communities, and is gradually becoming a custom among the young folks throughout the State.

The vast crowds of visitors from a distance, who come to Salem to witness the imposing ceremonies of Easter, increase every year, being drawn thither by the fame of the music, and the quaint distinctiveness of the services. Then returning to their homes, the pilgrims to this new-world Mecca carry with them the most indelible impressions of the beautiful piety of the Moravian people.

Edward A. Oldham.

